



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF PENTECOST, JUNE 9, 2019
ACTS 2:1-21; ROMANS 8:14-17; PSALM 104: 25-35,37; JOHN 14:8-17, 25-27

AMAZED AND ASTONISHED



ACTS 2:1-21 *[When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,*

let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"]

Happy Pentecost!

This is a great festival of the Church Year, drawing upon the ancient festival celebrating the winter wheat harvest in Palestine. Our forebears in the Jewish tradition dating back several centuries before Christ made their way as pilgrims to Jerusalem to offer the first fruits of their harvest to God in thanksgiving for the blessings of life represented by the wheat. Gifts of God for the People of God.

It was a beautiful tradition, into which those who had followed Jesus were stepping on this particular morning in Jerusalem, fifty days after the Passover. The city was brimming with pilgrims from around the world who were there to make their offerings of life and labor to God. We who gather here each week are invited into our adapted practice of offering a similar sacrifice of thanksgiving, using money as the proxy along with the bread and wine brought forward to share a meal.

The plates that are passed are not designed to be a weekly begathon to keep the lights on;

they are an invitation into practicing gratitude, giving joyfully as a way of discovering time and again our connection with God and with the whole of creation. I suspect for many of us it becomes rote, a thoughtless act of repetition.

But on that first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection, we are told that the people who gathered in the streets were amazed and astonished at what happened.

I will admit it takes a lot for me to be amazed and astonished in my daily life anymore, and when I am, I often look upon the spectacle with wary or cynical eyes. I leave little room for the Spirit to break in to the normalcy of life's routine. Too analytical, too dubious, too tamped down, too cynical, too something...because it doesn't happen the way the passage from Acts describes it, with loud rushing wind and tongues as of fire lighting on my head.

I had an experience one time, when I was fifteen, at church camp one night late when I was supposed to be in my cabin, but I think I

was out looking for burning bushes. I found myself standing on the edge of the sandstone plateau, cut out over the centuries by the meandering Arkansas River, which is flooding this week once more. The valley 1500 feet beneath me is alluvial plain, fertile land sown as a patchwork of farm land.

It was a dark night with storm clouds flickering and rumbling in the distance, slowly making their way toward me and the mountain. Mist on the wind lighted on my face, but that was as close as the storm cloud came, coming to rest oddly in the valley below me. I watched as it let loose in thunderous display, beneath my perch atop Petit Jean Mountain.

Now I can explain all of that using precepts of atmospheric science, and to suggest anything more may sound like a bunch of hooey. But that night I was keenly aware of God's presence all around, and I count it as a liminal experience, a holy moment in which I was simply exceedingly grateful for life, my life connected to God. It was a seminal moment for me in my faith journey, but I will also tell you that mountaintop experiences will not sustain us on the journey day by day. Our hearts and souls need regular nourishment to find our way, and I am convinced that gratitude is the daily bread we need.

I keep a blurry photo on the bookshelf in my office to remind me of this. It was a simple photograph from a newspaper—the New York Times actually. I was digesting the content of the news one morning several years ago—a rote activity that carries the risk of desensitized scanning of the pages. But then the photograph came into focus—real focus. It was one of those “CityScape” sort of photos, just catching people in some activity of life.

The photo is entitled “Hose Baptism,” and I would like to describe it in some detail, if I can. It's also on the front of the sermon transcript in the narthex, and will be posted to the sermon page of the website tomorrow.

The photo is set on a street in Harlem, where a crowd of people have gathered, and there is a haziness to the photo, which at first glance might suggest poor photographic skills, but on closer look the frothiness is caused by a mist of water, gently settling upon these people who are dressed in their finery, declaring this is a special event.

They are standing in the spray of water arcing from a nearby fire hydrant—the water is not forceful, but settling on them gently, and their faces suggest that they are pleased. There are two buses in the background, presumably the vehicles that have delivered many of these persons, and which have now

successfully closed this street to traffic. There is a park to the right, but it appears to have fallen silent—no one is there. The people are in the street, and my conclusion is that they are reveling in the utter pleasure of living and breathing. Hose Baptism.

On this day, these modern disciples of Christ were celebrating, experiencing, and living in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Just as the disciples were on that feast of Pentecost long ago. Celebrating, experiencing and living in the presence of the Holy Spirit. And they were amazed and astonished.

I want to be amazed and astonished more in my life. Perhaps you do as well. It's the portal into being grateful.

I want to celebrate, experience and live in the presence of the Holy Spirit more in my life. Do you want that too?

Those ancient disciples already had the Holy Spirit—Jesus told them so, and us as well. The

spectacle of Pentecost is in its reveling—it is an invitation to respond by celebrating, experiencing and living in the presence of the Holy Spirit—the same Holy Spirit that was there the day before and will be there the day after, and every day of every one of our lives. Practicing gratefulness will help us see that more and more in astonishing and amazing ways.

Let the mist of baptismal waters light on your face today reminding you of the Spirit's presence on your journey.

Smell the fragrant oil of chrism used on those to be baptized in this place today.

Listen to the laughter of joy that this occasion holds for those around you.

Taste the morsel of thanksgiving bread as it melts in your mouth.

And look for the Spirit of God moving in our midst. Can you see her through amazed and astonished eyes?

